

Senator Trent Lott
March 25, 1999
Surface Transportation and Merchant
Marine Subcommittee
Hearing on Grade Crossing Safety

Madam Chairman, I applaud you and the Surface Transportation Subcommittee for holding this hearing today. Highway-rail grade crossing safety is a serious issue that merits the Subcommittee's attention.

The tragedy of the Amtrak collision in Illinois caught the attention of the nation and the national media. It certainly hit home in my home state, as we lost five Mississippians in that crash. But the national media's attention is already focussing on Kosovo, and the lessons of the Illinois crash will soon fade from the minds of most Americans. This is unfortunate, because motor vehicle drivers are 40 times more likely to die from a collision involving a train than from a collision involving another motor vehicle. Sadly, grade crossing deaths are avoidable.

As we will hear today, the number of highway-rail grade crossings in America is huge, over 150,000, and most do not even have warning systems as modern as the site of the Amtrak crash. The cost of eliminating or separating all of these crossings would run into the billions, or even trillions, of dollars. And, as we saw in Illinois, even modern warning systems depend on motor vehicle drivers to make the right decision.

That is where Operation Lifesaver comes in. I want to tip my hat to Senator Hutchison because she played a major role in creating this national organization. For over two decades, Operation Lifesaver has been spreading its message to drivers to heed the dangers of highway-rail crossings. They have been very successful, but their task is enormous and enduring and their resources are small.

The number of grade crossing deaths is slowly declining, but still significant. In Mississippi alone, 23 people were killed and 63 people were seriously injured last year. Many of my colleagues here today will discover that their states have similar statistics. Operation Lifesaver needs more help.

Yesterday, I introduced the "Look, Listen, and Live Stamp Act", S. 712. This bill would authorize the Postal Service to sell special grade-crossing safety stamps at up to 25 percent more than the cost of a first-class stamp, with the difference going to provide additional Operation Lifesaver funding. Postal Service customers could choose to buy these special stamps, and thereby contribute to this worthy cause, or continue to purchase regular first-class stamps at the going rate. The choice would be theirs. But the stamp's message will be seen in every post office in America and by recipients of mail using the stamp. I invite all my colleagues here today to join as cosponsors of this bill.

Most importantly, the stamp will provide a constant reminder of the need to exercise

caution in crossing railroad tracks. This is the key to saving lives now. By increasing the reach and frequency of Operation Lifesaver's message, we can increase the odds that the millions of drivers crossing railroad tracks every day will know and remember to treat each crossing as a life or death decision. I urge my colleagues to take a comprehensive look at the highway-rail grade crossing situation and take an active interest in helping to prevent these avoidable deaths.

Let me thank Senator Hutchison for lining up two distinguished panels of experts to address this serious safety matter. I also want to thank today's witnesses for being able to come to Congress so quickly.